



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Parent, Family and Community Engagement

Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness for Early Childhood Professionals

This resource is part of a series designed for professionals in Head Start, Early Head Start and child care, including early childhood and school-age child care providers, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agency (or designated entity) staff, and other key stakeholders.



Understanding Family Homelessness

Today, a large and growing number of children are living in families experiencing homelessness. Many factors can cause homelessness. The state of homelessness creates multiple challenges for families and children.

Head Start, Early Head Start, and programs that receive CCDF funding can help with some of these challenges. In particular, these programs can provide stability, support, and enriching experiences that promote healthy development and learning.

Facts About Homelessness

Fact 1: A growing number of children are experiencing homelessness.

An estimated total of 1,266,605 children under the age of 6 experienced homelessness in 2013.¹ According to a federal government's 2012 homelessness report, in 2012, 12 percent of children who were living in family shelters funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2012 were under age 1, and more than 50 percent were age 5 or younger.²

Infants are the most vulnerable of all populations. However, infancy is the period of life when a child is at greatest risk of living in a homeless shelter in the United States.³

According to data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), 1,263,323 students in grades pre-K through 12 experienced homelessness during the 2014–15 school year. Sixty-one percent of these students were in grades pre-K through six, and 58 percent were in grades K through six.⁴

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Fact 2: Many factors can cause families to experience homelessness

The primary causes of homelessness among families include one or more of the following:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Poverty, often caused by low-wage employment, unemployment, and lack of education
- The impact of national economic downturns
- Health challenges, including mental health and addiction
- Domestic violence and other traumatic events
- Natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes
- Challenging economic situations and frequent moves due to immigration status^{5,6,7}

Fact 3: Families experiencing homelessness stay in a variety of places.

Families experiencing homelessness stay in a variety of places, including shelters, motels, cars, transitional housing provided by programs, and temporarily with other people.

According to 2013–14 data from ED, 15 percent of children and youth who are enrolled in public schools and who experience homelessness stay in shelters; 75 percent stay with other people because they have nowhere else to go; six percent stay in motels; and three percent live unsheltered.⁸

These situations are often risky, crowded, unstable, and unsafe. Therefore, it is common for families experiencing homelessness to move among all of these situations.

These conditions are challenging for many reasons, including:

- Emergency shelters in urban and suburban areas are often full and have to turn people away
- Rural and some suburban areas may not have shelters at all
- Many shelters limit eligibility (e.g., shelters often do not allow unaccompanied minors or families with adolescent boys)
- Youth who are experiencing homelessness may be afraid to enter an adult shelter, even if they are allowed
- Some shelters designed for families with children do not allow men to stay, which makes it difficult for single fathers or for two-parent families to stay together
- Shelters also often have stay limits, only allowing families to stay for 30, 60, or 90 days.
- Families and youth may not have enough money to stay at a motel.
- Families and youth may leave their homes in crisis, fleeing to the first available location.
- Recent changes in federal housing policy, called Diversion and Rapid Rehousing, often guide families away from publicly-funded shelters and toward staying in motels or with others.

Fact 4: Homelessness creates many challenges for families.

Homelessness creates many challenges for families, including:

- Inadequate basic needs (e.g., food, sleep, health care, and safe and stable living conditions)
- Mental health issues, such as a profound sense of loss, anxiety, or depression
- Safety concerns and fears related to domestic violence
- Not knowing where to find help
- Lack of resources to ensure a safe home environment
- Feelings of embarrassment about their inability to provide for their family
- Transportation challenges, including the inability to get to work, early childhood programs, school-age child care, school, or other programs
- Barriers to finding work, such as lack of child care
- Disruption or loss of usual social supports, such as family members, friends, or neighbors



Fact 5: Homelessness creates many challenges for children.

Homelessness is highly disruptive to a child's life. It interferes with healthy growth and development, and it negatively affects a child's feelings of safety and security. Children experiencing homelessness may be challenged by:

- Frequent moves, which can disrupt consistent participation in early childhood and school-age child care programs and result in a loss of structure, stability, and relationships with caregivers, teachers, and peers
- Inadequate access to food and health care
- Difficulty sleeping and eating
- Lack of access to safe and developmentally appropriate living spaces and experiences
- Trauma and loss
- Higher rates of developmental delays, difficulty in school, and chronic and acute physical and mental health problems
- Disrupted or insecure attachments to caregivers

Fact 6: Homelessness negatively impacts child development, school readiness, and academic outcomes.

Studies have found that experiences of homelessness in infancy and early childhood are associated with:

- Acute and chronic health problems (e.g., asthma) and inadequate access to medical and dental care

- More social, emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental delays (e.g., language, fine motor, and social skills)
- Greater risk for behavior problems in school (e.g., challenges in focusing attention)
- Poor academic outcomes (e.g., below grade-level performance)⁹

Children who are experiencing homelessness need extra support. Head Start, Early Head Start, and programs that receive CCDF funding, including school-age child care programs, can provide that support.

These programs can serve as sources of stability, resources, and enriching experiences that strengthen families and promote healthy development and learning. These programs can also support connections to community resources that are often missing in the lives of families experiencing homelessness.



Fact 7: Families experiencing homelessness face barriers to early childhood and school-age child care programs.

The state of homelessness can create many barriers to program participation, including:

- **Lack of required documents.** Families may lack documents that programs require for enrollment, such as immunization records and birth certificates.
- **Lack of transportation.** Families who relocate often do not have vehicles or money for transportation to programs.
- **High mobility.** Families are often forced to move among temporary living situations. Therefore, their children's attendance in program may not be consistent, or families may leave the service area altogether.
- **Invisibility of homelessness.** Most families stay in a variety of unstable situations. These largely hidden living arrangements make it difficult to identify and reach out to these families.
- **Stigma.** Families often keep their situation and circumstances hidden from friends and professionals because they worry about being judged. They may also feel ashamed or embarrassed. Families may not ask for help or be aware that services are available to them because of these reasons.
- **Lack of awareness.** Professionals may not be aware of the extent of family homelessness in their communities. Social service providers who work with families experiencing homelessness may not understand the unique needs of young children, or know what programs are available for them.¹⁰

Fact 8: Head Start, Early Head Start, and programs that receive funding through CCDF subsidies use the definition of “homeless children and youth.” It is included in Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11435a(2)], and is hereinafter referred to as the “McKinney-Vento Act’s definition.”

The following programs are required to use the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of “homeless children and youth”:

- Head Start
- Early Head Start
- Early childhood and school-age child care programs that receive CCDF subsidies
- Public schools and programs under Parts B and C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The definition refers to “children and youths who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” The McKinney-Vento Act’s definition specifically includes children living in emergency shelters, motels, hotels, trailer parks, cars, parks, public spaces, or abandoned buildings. It also includes those sharing the home of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.

Review of Federal Laws and Regulations

Now that you have learned facts about family homelessness, let’s review the federal laws and regulations that govern Head Start, Early Head Start, and other federally-funded early childhood and school-age child care programs.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

According to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), Head Start and Early Head Start programs must:

- Use the McKinney-Vento Act’s definition of “[homeless children and youths](#)”
- Include homelessness in [community needs assessments](#)
- Identify children experiencing homelessness and prioritize them for enrollment
- Make efforts to maintain the [enrollment](#) of children experiencing homelessness when the family or child moves to a different service area, or make efforts to transition the child to a program in a different service area, according to the family’s needs
- Allow children experiencing homelessness to [attend for up to 90 days](#) without immunization and other records (or as long as allowed under state licensing requirements), and work with families to get children immunized as soon as possible
- Use community resources to provide transportation to homeless children if a lack thereof poses a barrier to program [participation](#), where possible
- [Establish partnerships](#) with community organizations, including housing assistance agencies and the local education agency (LEA) liaison

- Make efforts to support [effective transitions](#) to other Head Start or Early Head Start programs when families experiencing homelessness move out of the community where they are currently being served

If a program determines from the community assessment that there are families experiencing homelessness in the area, the program may reserve one or more [enrollment slots](#) for pregnant women and children when a vacancy occurs. Up to three percent of a program's funded enrollment may be reserved for pregnant women and children experiencing homelessness.



Child Care and Development Fund Final Rule

The CCDF Final Rule is based on the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) of 2014. It requires Lead Agencies to:

- Use the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of "homeless children and youths"
- Coordinate the provision of child care services with other early childhood programs, including those that serve children experiencing homelessness
- Establish a grace period that allows children experiencing homelessness to receive services while providing families a reasonable amount of time to comply with immunization and other health and safety requirements
- Give priority for services to children experiencing homelessness
 - Lead Agencies have flexibility about how they meet this requirement, which does not necessarily guarantee a CCDF subsidy
- Improve access to services by expending funds to:
 - Develop procedures to permit enrollment while required documents are acquired
 - Provide training and technical assistance to child care providers and Lead Agency staff about identifying and serving children experiencing homelessness and their families
 - Offer specific outreach to families experiencing homelessness
- Provide to the Office of Child Care quarterly case-level reports, which include whether a family is experiencing homelessness

Other Federal Laws and Regulations

Section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11435a(2)] and IDEA identify requirements for local education agencies (LEAs), state education agencies, and Early Intervention (Part C) Lead Agencies.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Under section 725(2) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [42 U.S.C. § 11435a(2)], every LEA must designate a liaison for children and youth who are experiencing homelessness.

The LEA homeless liaison has many responsibilities, including identifying children in homeless situations and ensuring their access to Head Start, Early Head Start, early intervention services under IDEA Part C, or other quality early childhood services.

Children and youth experiencing homelessness have the right to stay in their school of origin, even if they move outside of the area served by that school. They also have the right to receive transportation to and from their school of origin.

“School of origin” refers to the school a child attended when permanently housed, or the school in which he or she was last enrolled.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires any state receiving a Part C grant to make early intervention services available to infants and toddlers with disabilities whose families are experiencing homelessness.

The Child Find section of IDEA requires states to ensure that all children with disabilities experiencing homelessness are located and evaluated.

Any state that receives IDEA funding must ensure that the educational requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act are met for all children with disabilities in homeless situations.

Additional Resources

Child Care and Development Fund Reauthorization

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/ccdf-reauthorization>

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

<http://nche.ed.gov/legis/mv-def.php>

Notes

¹ Ellen L. Bassuk, Carmella J. DeCandia, Corey Anne Beach, and Fred Berman, *America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness* (Waltham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research, November 2014). <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Americas-Youngest-Outcasts-Child-Homelessness-Nov2014.pdf>

² Administration for Children and Families, *Early Childhood Homelessness in the United States: 50-State Profile* (January 2016). https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/homelessness_profile_package_with_blanks_for_printing_508.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ National Center for Homeless Education, *Federal Data Summary—School Years 2012–13 to 2014–15: Education for Homeless Children and Youth* (Greensboro, NC: National Center for Homeless Education, December 2016), 11. <https://nche.ed.gov/downloads/data-comp-1213-1415.pdf>

⁵ National Center on Family Homelessness, *The Characteristics and Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness* (Needham, MA: Author, December 2011). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED535499>

⁶ Ellen L. Bassuk, Carmella J. DeCandia, Corey Anne Beach, and Fred Berman, *America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness* (Waltham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research, November 2014). <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Americas-Youngest-Outcasts-Child-Homelessness-Nov2014.pdf>

⁷ National Center for Homeless Education, *Immigrant and Homeless: Information for Local Liaisons* (2009). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522275.pdf>

Notes, cont.

⁸ Child Trends Data Bank, *Homeless Children and Youth: Indicators of Child and Youth Well-being* (October 2015), 3. https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/112_Homeless_Children_and_Youth.pdf

⁹ Marci McCoy-Roth, Bonnie Mackintosh, and David Murphey, “When the Bough Breaks: The Effects of Homelessness on Young Children,” *Child Trends: Early Childhood Highlight* 3, no. 1 (February 2012): 2–3. <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2012-08EffectHomelessnessChildren.pdf>

¹⁰ National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE, Early Care and Education for Children Experiencing Homelessness (Fall 2013). https://nche.ed.gov/ibt/sc_preschool.php

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